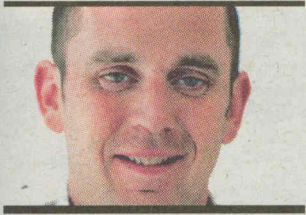


Factories move to protect supplies



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A bid to protect their supply base Irish meat factories appear to be slowly starting to fight back against the dominance of the live export market.

Less than three weeks after having launched the Save our Suckler Club (SOS), which guaranteed farmers the same beef price for once bred heifers as steers, the Dawn Meats Group has now launched a Dairy Beef Club. The move comes as a growing number of farmers opt to sell dairy bull calves for live export as opposed to rearing them. Bord Bia figures show that in the year to date almost 50,000 calves have been export live, a 56% increase on the same period last year.

In announcing the scheme Paul Nolan, Group Development Manager, said that the motivation for this project has come from evidence that

the current marketing channels being used by dairy farmers for their bull calves are loss making, whilst better marketing outlets are possible.

As part of the initiative Dawn will work with Teagasc in adopting the latest rearing and finishing technologies to come out of both the Grange and Moorepark research centres. This will see Teagasc setting up a demonstration farm at the Johnstown Castle Research centre in Wexford to focus on dairy beef production systems.

A number of demonstration farms are also being set up in the south, south east and west of the country with the first animals due for slaughter in late 2011. The project involves collecting two week old bull calves and delivering them to specialised rearing units that will be given a menu of feeding regimes for the production of suitable bull beef from 15 — 21 months of age.

SUCKLERS DOWN 4%

Meanwhile the December census figures, live export figures and slaughter data clearly show the challenges that lay ahead for meat factories in terms of maintain-

ing levels of throughput. The December 2009 census figures show a 4% drop in the number of beef cows in the national herd compared to the same period the previous year.

A clear indication that this downward trend is set to continue is the 10% drop record in the number of beef heifers retained for breeding. The census figures show that the strong live export trade for calves and weanlings in 2009 resulted in the number of animals under one-year-old down 5% or 87,000 head on the same period the previous year.

The national kill figures support the theory that farm-

ers are starting to exit suckler production. So far this year cow slaughterings are running 20% or 10,000 head above the same period last year. Heifer throughput is up almost 17% or 14,000 head compared to the same period last year.

Unless Irish meat factories can move to instate confidence in the beef sector, then ongoing decline in suckler cow numbers coupled with a strong live export trade has the potential see throughput at Irish meat factories drop to below 1.3 million head in 2011. This would equate a 25% decline in cattle slaughterings over a period of just five years.